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REVIEW

Mitchell Dean, *Governing Societies: Political Perspectives on Domestic and International Rule* (New York: Open University Press, 2007). ISBN: 0335208975

In the January 2008 issue of *Foucault Studies*, Colin Gordon and Jacques Donzelot offer an evaluation of governmentality scholarship since the landmark 1991 publication of *The Foucault Effect*. In this conversation, Gordon and Donzelot articulate concerns over how Foucault's perspectives on liberalism and government have been taken up over the past two decades. Donzelot claims that while the analysis of neo-liberal governmentality has yielded many important insights it has also tended to flatten the innovative and critical potential of Foucault's approach. They both agree that in some cases this has led to an exaggerated focus on the "technical" as opposed to the "political" aspects of neo-liberalism, as well as a kind of "ambivalent" "rationalization" of its central rationalities.¹

Mitchell Dean's book represents an attempt to address these concerns. For readers not familiar with Dean, he has been one of the leading scholars in governmentality studies since the early 1990s. In *Governing Societies* he moves away from the more systematized "analytics of government" approach developed within his previous work and instead embarks on a detailed engagement with the political dimension of liberal powers. His overarching claim within *Governing Societies* is that mainstream social science narratives as well as perspectives in governmentality have failed to adequately apprehend the rapid changes in domestic and international governance in the post 9/11 era due to their failure to engage it politically -- that is, "as something concerned with power, confrontation and appropriation, with struggle resistance and combat, and with the use and threat of force".²

On the one hand, Dean is interested in producing a sober counter-narrative to social and political theorists who have claimed that neo-liberal globalization has thrown the historical project of governing societies into doubt. On the other hand, he seeks to revive the relevancy of studies in governmentality, which he argues have in many cases become complicit in reproducing instead of challenging the normative

¹ Jacques Donzelot and Colin Gordon, "Governing Liberal Societies: the Foucault Effect in the English Speaking World," *Foucault Studies* 5 (2008), 48-62.

² Dean, 1.

logics of neo-liberal rule. He argues that this is the result of a general failure of governmentality studies to attend to the continuing salience of sovereignty and its complex relation to matters of life and death. Through an appropriation of insights from Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben, Dean foregrounds the political in order to critically account for the assemblages of governmental, biopolitical, and sovereign powers, which, he argues, are intrinsic to liberalism itself.

Governing Societies is divided into three thematic sections. In the first section entitled *Dilemmas*, Dean outlines the historical conditions that gave rise to the project of governing societies. He argues that since the origin of the modern state and state system with the *Treaty of Westphalia*, the liberal project of governing societies has been defined by two distinctions. First, by respecting the quasi-natural processes of a domain separate from the state within civil society, liberal “arts of security” have employed governmental forms of expertise in order to optimize economic and social efficiency within particular national frameworks. Second, these liberal “arts of security” have worked to maintain this order by defeating and punishing enemies who violate or threaten it both within and outside the borders of the nation. Dean argues that one of the mistakes realist political theory has made is to treat the liberal state as a concrete arrangement as opposed to a discursively constituted tendency, or “aspiration”, which must be continually made and remade through legal, economic, and social and cultural processes in accordance with shifting historical conditions. This misrecognition has led to a fundamental misinterpretation of liberal rule within the contemporary era. He claims that while neo-liberal globalization has presented various challenges to the traditional alignments of governing societies it has not effaced them.

In the third and final chapter of the *Dilemmas* section, Dean expands this argument through a critique of mainstream social science narratives of globalization. Drawing on Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck, he raises questions concerning the presumed decline of state power and the corollary rise of a more flexible, reflexive, and cosmopolitan subject of government. Dean contends that this assumes a “deterritorialized political sphere” and a “detraditionalized social sphere” leading to the displacement of governmental authority onto a host of technologies that work primarily through the freedom and ethical culture of individuals.³ He argues that these narratives are teleological in that their normative articulations presume the very outcomes that they prescribe. In contrast, he uses the notion of “dividing practices” in order to describe how governmental rationalities work to differentiate populations based upon exceptions to liberal norms which determine those who are capable of government through freedom, those in need of obligation, and those requiring coercion and violence. He suggests that we need “to ask when, in what contexts, how, and for which individuals and groups, governance conducted with the aim of activating individuals comes to place obligations above freedom,

³ Dean, 73.

and the use of sanctions and coercive measures in the establishment of a particular form of life".⁴ Such questions help to foreground the variegated relations of knowledge and power defining the terrain in which political struggles over economic provision and social recognition necessarily take place. They also destabilize discourses that situate neo-liberal government as primarily governing through freedom, as governmental programs such as welfare reform, zero tolerance policies, and immigration enforcement apply heavy-handed modes of obligation and physical force against those positioned outside the norms of autonomy and full citizenship.

In section two, entitled *Diagnostics*, Dean shifts his analysis to perspectives on governmentality. In these two chapters he emphasizes a "critical" as opposed to a "descriptive" side of a governmentality perspective. This represents an attempt to extend governmentality beyond concerns with the "conduct of conduct", which he locates as only one potential zone of liberal power. Dean argues that a "critical" governmentality approach to liberalism entails diagnosing the disjuncture between liberalism's normative claims to provide a safeguard against authoritarian forms of rule, and the operation of biopolitical and sovereign powers that often take illiberal and despotic forms. This leads to one of Dean's most provocative suggestions, that liberalism has an intrinsic "authoritarian" dimension inherent in a liberal understanding of government itself. He locates this "authoritarian" dimension in the traffic between a "legal political-order" and a "liberal order of police" that works to define what constitutes accepted frames of life that may be, if necessary, defended against their exceptions through coercion and violence. Here, biopolitics, sovereignty, and government are conceived as overlapping complexes of power that may become operable in variable combinations within the social field, perhaps even falling into what Agamben has called a "zone of indistinction". This refers to situations where decisions over life and death blur the boundaries of biopolitics and sovereignty, such as in cases concerning bioethics and human reproduction, or geopolitically, when a nation seeks to defend and promote its "way of life" through war, such as in the United States invasion of Iraq.

In the third section of the book entitled *Departures*, Dean draws on Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben in order to engage questions concerning sovereignty and the state of exception. Here, Dean expands Schmitt's conception of the sovereign as "he who decides the exception" in two key ways. First, he argues that Schmitt's view of sovereignty does not account for the multidimensional processes of domination and contestation whereby legal, cultural, institutional, and technological norms are produced. "Thus while it might be said that the sovereign can decide when a normal legal order exists, it does not readily follow that he thereby decides what constitutes a 'normal' social existence".⁵ Second, against the notion that the sovereign decision resides only or even primarily within the juridical-legal and constitu-

⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵ Dean, 163.

tional authority of the state, Dean seeks to widen the field of sovereign decision by analyzing how sovereign powers and the localization and diffusion of the decision, are “delegated” and “arrogated” within local-global regimes of institutional and social practices. He claims that “if the governmentality perspective misses the sovereign decision imbricated within regimes of practices, Schmitt misses the normalizing practices that surround the exception”.⁶

Building on his analysis of Schmitt, Dean offers an extended engagement and critique of Giorgio Agamben. He reads Agamben’s work as a “totalizing critique of the present” in which the camp becomes the central spatial-(extra)legal construct of the contemporary moment, or, in Agamben’s language, the “new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet”.⁷ While finding much theoretical value in Agamben, he contests the overly generalized logic of the camp on the grounds that its focus on the most extreme and sensational examples limits possibilities for conceiving the full range of political, economic, legal, and social conditions in which decisions on the exception are made. In contrast, Dean argues that decisions on the exception are integrated at multiple and overlapping scales and become “delegated” and “arrogated” throughout “the very fabric of normal life”.⁸ In other words, decisions on the exception occur at all scales involving individuals, institutions, and political formations.

While *Governing Societies* offers a series of provocative challenges and insights for governmentality studies it is not without its weaknesses. At times it appears that Dean is guilty of overplaying his argument against social science accounts of globalization. Throughout the book he directs his critique against theorists, most notably the aforementioned Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck, who, Dean claims, have prematurely asserted the death of governing societies and the rise of a networked cosmopolitan world, without ever delving very deeply into the nuances of their arguments and/or, the significant differences between them. Moreover, his lengthy commentary and critique of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben at least partially belies the recent widespread scholarly interest in the configuration and (re)assertion of contemporary forms of sovereignty. Additionally, while acknowledging that the “dividing practices” of liberal rule position subjects and groups on a scale of worthiness for full autonomy, and that the most violent forms of power are most often directed toward “minority populations”, Dean misses the opportunity to deepen his analysis by delving more specifically into how various registers of social difference operate within liberal rule. In particular, how distinctly political matters involving access and struggles over social provision and symbolic recognition become re-routed through various discursive and material processes to enforce obligations and to coerce through race, class, ethnic, gender, and sexual differences.

These criticisms aside, *Governing Societies* offers a wide range of theoretical

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁸ Ibid., 194.

insights for those interested in the continuing saliency of Foucault's thought for grappling with modern governance on both a domestic and international scale. In particular, it offers invaluable tools for rethinking governmentality through the lens of the political: as something concerned with the complex realities of antagonism, resistance, and struggle. Furthermore, by analyzing the depth at which biopolitical and sovereign powers operate within contemporary liberal rule, Dean has provided much needed insight for re-engaging governmentality on a more creative and critical level.

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